

#154 WILLIAM LEFABVRE: PRINTER ABOARD THE USS *WEST VIRGINIA*

(Conversation off-microphone.)

Bart Fredo (BF): Okay, I'm going to read this slate. The following interview of William Lefabvre was conducted on December 2, 1986 in Honolulu, at about six o'clock in the evening. Mr. Lefabvre lives in Goffstown, New Hampshire. And the interview is done by Bart Fredo, and also present was Mark Tanaka-Sanders of the National Park Service.

Mr. Lefabvre, let me start off by asking you to tell us your name and where you were from, back in 1941.

William Lefabvre (WL): My name is William Lefabvre. I'm from Goffstown, New Hampshire.

BF: What service were you in and what was your rank and job?

WL: I was in the U.S. Navy, and I was a printer, actually Seaman First Class.

BF: When did you come to Hawaii?

WL: When? I came in to Hawaii in, it was late 1940. And I was in Hawaii for less than a year before the attack.

BF: Which -- what was your assignment? Which ship were you aboard?

WL: I was aboard the USS *WEST VIRGINIA*.

BF: Let me take you back to that day, early that morning. What were you doing, early?

WL: Early that morning, we were getting ready to go to church, and I was in a print shop, which was down, I would say, even with the armor belt, on the starboard side, which was inboard, according to the attack, which I was very fortunate that it was. And we were waiting for coffee, as I said. And we heard this thump then the ship started to list immediately, and general quarters went. And almost simultaneously, "Abandon ship," went. Being that, naturally, just a seaman, we didn't know really what was going on. And it was real, I wouldn't say exciting, it was . . . we just didn't know what was going on.

BF: When did you find that, find out that something was going on?

WL: Well, when we got up to topside, but before I got up to topside, a Third Class Printer said to all of us in there, "Torpedoes, get the hell out of here!"

And that is still, in my mind, I never have forgot that. But I haven't seen that Third Class Printer. I'd really love to find out how he knew they were torpedoes, 'cause the rest of us were really in the fog until we got up to topside and saw all the things that were going on.

BF: Do you remember his name?

WL: Joe Rickowski, third class.

BF: Ever see him again?

WL: No.

BF: Last time that you saw him was that day?

WL: That was the last time that I had seen Joe.

BF: When you got topside, what did you see?

WL: An awful mess. That's one way to put it, the only way that I could put it. And a sad thing to see, to see your whole battle line just setting there all full of smoke. And, oh, everybody firing, that had a gun, possibly was firing. And it was very, very scary and the next thing, you know, I knew, I was very, very shocked, like everybody else must have been. And the next thing I knew, I felt my feet being cold. And evidently, the blast from the Arizona must have just swept me right off the ship, into the bay.

BF: Did you see the . . .

WL: And that's where I landed.

BF: Did you see the *ARIZONA* go up?

WL: Oh yes, we saw her go up. As a matter of fact, we were trying to lock down our deck, because the ship was listed and we could hardly manage to walk, so we were sliding down. And don't ask me why, we went towards the water. That's something that will . . . I mean, normally, you'd think you'd go towards the ship that was inboard so that you have a little protection. But, I mean, you know, when your things are going like that, you just do what your mind tells you to do and we went towards the water.

BF: Were you conscious of torpedoes or bombs hitting your ship, the *West Virginia*?

WL: No. No.

BF: Just that initial?

WL: Just that initial thump, the first initial thump. And then, like I say, he was a third class printer was the one that said torpedo. He was the one that gave us an indication there was something like that going on, but we didn't believe it until we got up to topside. That's why I'm still wondering where he got that information, how he could even analyze anything like that.

BF: The *WEST VIRGINIA* was outboard of the *TENNESSEE*?

WL: Outboard of the *TENNESSEE*.

BF: And the *ARIZONA* was next to . . .

WL: I think it was the *NEVADA*, which was inboard of her and she was aft of the *NEVADA*.

BF: Tell us what you, what else you saw when you went above deck.

WL: Well, besides our cog, you looked up and you could see just the shiny parts of the Japs' bombs coming in. And, oh, there was many of 'em. And we had very little planes in the air at all. As a matter of fact, I guess they did a very good job of wiping out the ones that had a chance to get out. And the ones that did get up, I mean, you couldn't recognize 'em because they were out, so far we outnumbered that you just couldn't tell one from the other.

BF: Could you see -- these Japanese planes -- could you actually see the pilots? Were they that low?

WL: Yes. They were very low, especially the torpedo planes, still coming at the other end of the bay. You could see them, they were very low. You could hit 'em with an apple. They were that low.

BF: Did you see any of these attacking planes hit by gunfire?

WL: Yes.

BF: Can you tell us about that?

WL: Well, I don't know the ships. Like I say, when you're all worked up like that, and when I did get blown into the water, I went to the motor launch that was out there and I picked up the swab, and I was pulling fellows in.

BF: A mop?

WL: That's right. That's what it was, a Navy mop, a swab.

BF: These are fellows from your ship, the *WEST VIRGINIA*.

WL: Anybody, we didn't care who they were. They were in the drink just like we were and so I was trying to pull them in.

BF: What other ships were these men from?

WL: The battleship group. All the battleship group.

BF: You were telling us about the airplanes, did you see any of the attacking planes hit?

WL: Yes, I saw one that was hit over near the fuel tanks, got hit by one of the battleship guns got it. I believe it was a five-inch hit it, and you saw that, it just descended really.

BF: And . . .

WL: The pilot, I didn't see the pilot at all on that one.

BF: Any others, did you see any other planes hit?

WL: Well, like I say, the way that the bombers were coming in at that time, by the time that we got up there.

BF: So you were in the water and then you were picked up by a launch and then you started rescuing other sailors in the water.

WL: The first class boatswain mate, which was formally my petty officer, with division PO, in the First Division, named Pruitt, told me. He says, "Lefabvre, get underneath the seat." He says, "Don't you know what those spots are in the water?"

Well I says, you know, "What are they?"

He says, "That's machine guns."

I asked him, "What are you going to do, let those guys die?"

He says, "You're gonna let them get hit?"

So we just kept on pulling them in, and even he got up and started to help me pull them in.

BF: Were you ever afraid during, while this was going on?

WL: There's no word for it. You're so scared, you're numb. That's the only way to put it.

BF: And yet still . . .

WL: You're scared, but you're, you do what you know you have to do.

BF: You're still functioning?

WL: Oh yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, maybe I had done things that I can't even tell you about, because, I mean, you just function like that from your training.

BF: Did you have -- when all of this was going on -- did you have any opportunity to look around the harbor and see what the scene was?

WL: When we got over to the sub base. See, when we filled the motor launch, we headed towards the sub base because that was, supposedly, as far as we were concerned, was an inlet, or we could try to help do something.

(END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE)

(VIDEOTAPE TWO)

BF: . . . this was going on -- did you have an opportunity to look around the harbor to see what the scene was like?

WL: Yes. When we got over to the sub base, we turned around and saw, that's when I say it was, that's when we realized that things were as bad as they were. It almost made us cry, actually. And we saw one of the last torpedo planes making its run and one of the battleships, I believe it was a five-inch anti-aircraft gun, get it. And it just ended really. And we didn't see the pilot on that plane at all. But we did see some pilots coming down from some

of the other planes that were shot down, that we didn't even seen get shot down. But we could tell they were Japs by the way they had their, they still had those airplane helmets that they wore, you know, and you could tell that they were not ours.

BF: Did you get back to the *WEST VIRGINIA* after you got blown off the ship?

WL: No. No, we went right over to the sub base because we could see that there was no way to get over there anyway. Because we had that motor launch there, but by that time, I don't know what happened to it. Maybe they went out to get some more and one of the printers said, "Let's go over and see if we can get re-assigned."

So we just went up the road by the fuel tanks and headed towards the sub base.

BF: Let me take you back again about when you were just coming topside, aboard the *WEST VIRGINIA*. Where did you come topside?

WL: From the print shop, which was located over on the starboard side, which was towards the *TENNESSEE*, that we were tied up at. And they didn't even . . . normally, when a ship like that is having a problem like that, they cut the housing. But they didn't, which was a good thing.

BF: So you were still tied to the *TENNESSEE*?

WL: Yes, we were still tied to the *TENNESSEE*?

BF: Why was that a good thing?

WL: Well, we, maybe, would have rolled right over like, I believe, the *OKLAHOMA*, could've completely turned over. And with those housings still on, they kept us from capsizing completely. We just settled right on our side.

BF: So where, what could you see? When you came topside, the *ARIZONA* was behind you and to the right.

WL: Right.

BF: What could you see there?

WL: Well, it didn't even look like the *ARIZONA*. She was already, she was already half-down by the time we got up there. And then she was still exploding. And by the time we reached the shoreline, she was just about as far down as she was going.

BF: How long were you topside before you were into, blown into the water?

WL: Almost made it to water level, sliding down, grabbing a hold of this and that.

BF: So you weren't on deck very long?

WL: No, not very long. I would say it was a matter of just seconds.

BF: Did you lose a lot of friends that day?

WL: No, because, maybe, on the deck force, but I mean as far as the friends, if you mean in the print shop, no. But as far as friends, oh yes, we lost some. But I didn't know them by name, or anything, because, see, they were below decks. Oh yes, we lost, I would say . . .

(TAPE STOPS, RESTARTS)

BF: What was the rest of the day like?

WL: The rest of the day? Well, the rest of the day was real hard to take, because there was a lot on our mind. We were trying to get reorganized and I don't mean just the sailors, I mean Marines, soldiers and everybody on that island was trying to get reorganized and naturally, figuring that there might be a possible invasion, so there was a lot of barbed wiring and stuff like that going on. And by the way, by the time our, we got halfway up to the sub base, somebody said to me, "Hey, don't you know enough to wear any clothes?"

And I didn't realize it until at that moment that I was naked except for two shirt sleeves. That's all I had, two cuffs. The only cuffs from my dungaree shirt. That's all I had for clothing.

BF: Where did you lose it?

WL: Must have been from the concussion, which I didn't, like I say, I don't, didn't even realize I was blown into the ship, off the ship until I landed in the water. And we were all very dark from the fuel. But we just weren't concentrating on clothes and stuff like that, we were trying to get to a place where we could help or do something.

BF: During the attack, what was, what was going through your mind? What were you thinking about?

WL: Well, it was hard to believe. Really, it was trying to figure out if that third class printer was right or if he was wrong. And after we got up to topside we realized that it was true. But then, being only a seaman, you just don't know what you can do, but you know you gotta do something and you gotta do it quick. And that's what we tried to do, that was in our mind. Try to get to a place where we could help and, you know, do all we could to either repel an invasion or do something.

BF: Was there a lot of confusion?

WL: Very, very much so. Yes. But it didn't take long before they were really organized and knew what they were doing. It was just that first hour or two that was real bad, as far as confusion.

BF: What's the one thing about that day that sticks in your mind the most?

WL: Wondering if we'd ever get back and be able to, without that battle line -- because, see, we were all, it was always put in our mind that that was our first line of defense. And to see them sitting there and not able to do anything, it made you wonder if we're ever going to get back. That was in our

mind. Not only mine, but I mean a lot of the minds. We were wondering if we were ever going to get back.

BF: How long was it after the attack that you eventually left Hawaii?

WL: Left what?

BF: Hawaii, Hawaii.

WL: Very shortly because I was transferred three days later onto the USS *SAN FRANCISCO*.

BF: It's a cruiser.

WL: Which was a very . . . yeah, heavy cruiser, CA-38, which was a very active ship during the war.

BF: What were those three days like, before you left?

WL: Well, mostly trying to get cleaned up. That oil was very hard to get out of our pores and we had taken many showers. And we had to sleep on the piazzas out there in the sub base there.

BF: What is that?

WL: Well, it was . . . we had cots, they issued us cots and one uniform of, I would say, dungarees again. Because we were getting ready, you know, any boat crew we could help, that's what we were doing. And then they took us in a field and lined up all the seaman, all the third class petty officers and like that. And then we were reassigned to the ships that could get under way.

BF: All your belongings . . . ?

WL: Were gone.

BF: Never got . . .

WL: Had to be reissued. And I had the most sexiest blankets when I got aboard the *SAN FRANCISCO*. They went into the wrong stock place and they got these natural blankets. They had these nice silk edges and everything. That's what we had . . .

BF: Aboard the *SAN FRANCISCO*.

WL: . . . and so when the captain had his first captain's inspection after we were aboard, he says, "What the hell is this?" He thought it was at a show, I guess. But that's all we had. They made a mistake and they weren't about to make a change because they wanted to get us out as fast as we could.

BF: Briefly, what did you do for the rest of the war?

WL: I became a gunner's mate and I was on the five-inch anti-aircraft crew for the *SAN FRANCISCO*, and I stayed with her until she went through the canal and I helped put her under, as far as preserving her in Philadelphia. Then I

got transferred up to south Boston and preserved some aircraft carriers. Then I was discharged and recalled for the Korean War.

BF: As a result of what you went through that day, and for lack of a better word, do you have any animosity towards Japan or the Japanese?

WL: I was asked that many times, and deep down in my heart, yes, I still feel as though that, I don't know, it takes still a little while before I'd really forgive them all the way. But you gotta learn to live with 'em because the bible says you must. I have softened quite a bit, I will say.

BF: In seeing movies, reading books, are you often sort of transported back in time to that day and relive it again?

WL: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, it was a long time. I even used to dream, wake up in the middle of the night about it, thinking about it.

BF: Dream?

WL: Dreaming of it.

BF: As it happened.

WL: Yes.

BF: The same way it happened, or did it happen differently in your dreams?

WL: Oh, still the same way.

BF: What's happening? Tell us.

WL: Well, I mean, I felt the thumps and everything. And action, of course, aboard the "FRISCO", and stuff like that. Yeah, you get to feel the same, same instances that happen, same activities. But not all the way, you only get very short spurts of it.

BF: In 1991 will be the fiftieth anniversary of the attack. If you're here then, if you come back to Hawaii and some survivor, Japanese survivors of the war, or of the attack are here, would you like to see and talk with them?

WL: Oh, I'd even talk with them now, as a matter of fact. Like I said, I have softened quite a bit since then, but I mean, deep down in my heart, I still feel just a little resentment of it, that's all.

BF: How long did it take for you to soften up?

WL: Oh, a long time. A long time after the war. Because of some of the things that I'd seen on the islands, or with the "FRISCO", when they let us go ashore and saw some of the things that we had seen. It was unbelievable to even tell that I saw. That's one reason why I say you just can't forgive that easy.

BF: I've asked you this question, now let me ask it another way. When someone says "Pearl Harbor" to you, or "December 7," what's the first picture that flashes into your mind?

WL: The *WEST VIRGINIA*, and the *ARIZONA*. That's the first things that hit my mind. I see the, you know, the pictures that everybody sees, the *WEST VIRGINIA* laying on its side and the *ARIZONA* just about disappeared. And all the smoke. (Chiming in background) And that's all you see. You don't even see the rest of the ships because naturally I was attached to the wavy side, and I just . . . that's the first picture that comes to my mind.

BF: Excuse me, what's that? Oh, was it you?

(TAPING STOPS, THEN CONTINUES)

BF: When you hear the words "Pearl Harbor, December 7," what do you see in your mind?

WL: The *WEST VIRGINIA* laying on its side. The *ARIZONA*, what was left of it. And all that smoke and that's about all that I see because, naturally, being attached to the *WEST VIRGINIA*, it just sunk in that deep. That's what I see when people mention Pearl Harbor.

BF: You played a part in a very, very big event, a major event in this century. Has that effected your life in any way?

WL: No, not really. As a matter of fact, when I was getting ready to make this trip, the wife was talking to one of my neighbors and she told 'em we were going on our trip. "Where you going?"

"To Honolulu."

"What are you going to do down there?"

"Well, my husband's a Pearl Harbor survivor?"

And the neighbor said, "You mean we have a celebrity on this street and we didn't even know about it?"

So I mean, no, I don't -- it hasn't really changed my life because I don't really talk about it.

BF: Because you'd rather not?

WL: That's right. It's gone and, like you say, you try to, you know, we all got to try to get along again now, so you just try to get it out of your mind. It's hard, but you try to wipe it out if you can.

(TAPING STOPS, RESUMES)

BF: Were you wounded?

WL: The only thing I got out of this war, of the Pearl Harbor attack and the whole World War II, was a sprained ankle and I have to wear hearing aids, from the concussion from the five-inch guns, because I was a mount captain and the foam, foams kept on slapping against my ears. And I had to have pus wiped out and cleaned out every once in a while. And that's why I have to wear a hearing aid.

BF: The concussion, this was throughout the war, not on December 7?

WL: Right, yeah. That's throughout the war. Mostly . . .

(TAPING STOPS, RESUMES)

WL: When we were going over to the sub base, to show you, even at that early stage of the war -- you gotta say it was a war, because we were already into it -- they had Marines that were protecting our fuel tanks, even at that time. Well, when we got over there, walking up the road, there was a Marine sentry and he had his rifle, and he was at a post there. And we . . . one of those chaps that we saw coming down in this -- I didn't want to say this, but I will tell you -- he was coming down on his parachute and he was just outside of the fencing. And he made an attempt to run and he jumped on the fence and was going to try to go over, for what reason, I don't know. But the Marine didn't ask him. He fixed his bayonet, put a clip in his rifle and he took the bayonet and rammed it clear up his rump and fired at the same time and just flipped him on the side, and just went about his sentry duty, as though nothing had happened. That's how U.S. Marines, they don't take nothing from nobody.

BF: Did you see that?

WL: Yeah, I saw that happen.

BF: How did you feel when you saw that?

WL: Great. I felt as though, when I saw that round ball, I knew that plane falling down and I saw that round ball, I knew what it was and I knew we were at war, because look at how we saw our whole battle line there. So I felt real proud of that Marine, I'll tell you. Real proud of him.

BF: You were all very angry.

WL: Right. At that point, yes. Everybody on that road was cheering and everything else. We forgot our own sorrows. We felt that good about it. Even though it was one, at least it was one we got. We felt that, you know, it gave us that much of a punch to get us started again.

BF: I'm sure you can think of something else, another story, something else that happened that day, a vignette, a scene.

WL: Not that particular day because the only thing, like I say, we were just trying to get re-clothed and that took up most of our time there, trying to get re-clothed.

BF: How about another day then? Something happen that . . .

WL: Oh, that night, that night, naturally, our planes did get in the air, they were in the air, as a matter of fact, even during the day. When they were coming back, I mean, it was -- nobody took any chances at all, and we were even firing at our own planes. I mean, because we, you know, being that the insignias of both Japan and the United States, at that time were so close, you couldn't make them out.

BF: It was a circle and a star for U.S.

WL: I mean they were real close, right. See we had the star with the red circle and they had the red circle, so, I mean, that's, you just fire if you saw that red, red circle without even considering, you just fire at it. And a lot of times it was our own. And naturally, they talk to you and try to tell you who they were. You know, "Knock it off, boys, we're friends." And that's the problem we had a for a while. That's why we changed it to the white star. We were knocking off our own boys by mistake.

BF: Do you have anything, not necessarily with you now, but at home, something from that day?

WL: Yes. As a Gunner's Mate, when the war ended, for the . . . a souvenir that I received was a Jap rifle with the bayonet and all, and a case that fit over the bayonet. I've got that as a souvenir and it was authorized by the gunnery officer, which was the commanding officer of our, the ship, *SAN FRANCISCO*. And I got the permit to have it.

BF: But you don't have anything from the *WEST VIRGINIA*.

WL: No, everything was lost on the *WEST VIRGINIA*, everything.

BF: Including the shirt cuffs?

WL: Well, no, those, I should've kept those, but I don't know where those went. They were in a sub base somewhere. No, I should've kept those as a souvenir, but you don't think about it at that time. I oughta have them bronzed.

(TAPING STOPS, RESUMES)

WL: . . . in my heart, I hope that we have, and because I've worked with a lot of gallant men and I've lost a lot of friends, especially from the "FRISCO", because of the action that we had seen. And I believe that teamwork and believing in each other was one thing that got us through this whole thing, and I don't mean just the "FRISCO", I mean the whole United States. And if we keep on that trend of life, I hope that this thing will never happen again.

BF: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW